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On the Prowl in East Germany:

Team of G.I. Spies

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WEST BERLIN — If the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies decided to go to war, one of the first people to have a hint of impending hostilities might be Col. Roland Lajoie.

The strapping Russian-speaking American soldier, a former Army attaché in Moscow, leads one of the most secrecy-shrouded elite units in the United States military: a 14-man team that prowls East Germany conducting what amounts to legal espionage. In Opel sedans packed with telescopes, infrared cameras and listening devices, the colonel's Soviet counterparts do the same in West Germany.

The city of Berlin reposes, in legal terms, on a crazy quilt of documents concluded from 1944 onward between the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union and France. Allied in the struggle to defeat Nazi Germany, the four countries at the end of World War II carved up the defeated nation into zones of occupation.

An Accord in '47

In 1947 the American and Soviet sides reached an accord establishing military liaison missions with permission to travel in their respective zones. The Soviet Army concluded similar accords with the British and French military commanders.

In the ensuing years, the Federal Republic of Germany emerged as a middle-ranking power on the territory of the former American, British and French zones and, in the Russian zone, the German Democratic Republic established itself as Moscow's most reliable partner in the Warsaw Pact.

But, in the absence of a peace treaty ending World War II, the sovereignty of the two Germanys remains limited. It is in this vestigial legal gray zone that the American, British, French and Soviet military liaison missions operate, accredited only to each other and furnishing what some experts regard as the best on-site intelligence that can be gathered on Europe's heavily armed central front.

Every day Colonel Lajoie's men drive their four-wheel-drive Mercedes jeeps across the rickety Glienicke bridge to East Berlin, occasionally stopping at a white stucco American-owned villa in Potsdam where a handful of their comrades stay overnight. The bridge, spanning the neck of a small lake, has no other traffic, though in 1962 it served as the point where Francis Gary Powers, the pilot of a downed reconnaissance plane, and Col. Rudolf Abel, a Russian spy, were exchanged.

Cooperation 'Is Very Tight'

The British and the French have similar villas on the Communist side of the Berlin wall. From Potsdam the three allied teams fan out across East Germany where, lately, they have been on the lookout for SS-21 and SS-22 missiles that the Russians have started to position in Eastern Europe. "Cooperation with the Brits and the French is very tight," a knowledgeable American said.

"There is a great deal of lore about the M.L.M.'s," an American diplomat said, referring to the military liaison missions. "It's not a quiet, refined bunch of people."

The diplomat paused and added: "It's like playing under the basket in the N.B.A. There's a lot of shoving. Only in extreme cases do fouls get called."

Tailed by vigilant East German military vehicles, the observers' meandering jeeps are sometimes bumped or bracketed by trucks to keep them from probing in sensitive areas, which are designated by the Russians as "Temporarily Restricted Areas" or "Permanently Restricted Areas."

"It's dangerous as hell," a third diplomat said. "Sometimes they hold them and semi-arrest them."

French Team Hit Head-On

On March 22 a three-man French team driving down a major road near the East German city of Halle was rammed head-on by a heavy-duty East German Army truck. One French soldier was killed and another was seriously injured.

The French Government made a protest to the Soviet Union, reminding it that it was responsible for the safety of allied liaison vehicles in East Germany, but Paris did not publicize the Halle episode. Western diplomats in West Berlin say they are convinced the ramming was intentional, and some speak privately of murder.

The French vehicle appeared to have witnessed the annual Soviet and East German spring maneuvers. In the last few weeks those maneuvers have spilled over into the highly sensitive area of Western use of established air corridors to isolated West Berlin.

At Soviet insistence, American, British and French commercial airliners have lately been obliged to fly at higher than normal approaches to the city, and two pilots have reported being shadowed by Soviet MIG jet fighters. The Russians have contended that their fighters need the lower airspace in connection with the land maneuvers.

Western diplomats say they are unable to explain this Soviet behavior, since even the slightest pressure on West Berlin has the effect of tightening North Atlantic Treaty Organization unity, something presumed to be the opposite of Moscow's long-range goals in Western Europe. A senior Western diplomat speculated that the Soviet leadership might have decided that "a small pinprick at the allies is no bad thing," particularly if the Soviet military demonstrated that it did require the lower airspace.

The airspace is one of intimate contacts between the four World War II allies, who run a joint air-traffic control center in West Berlin. Monthly, too, American, Soviet, British and French troops rotate guard duty at the stark red-brick Spandau Prison in West Berlin. Its sole prisoner, Rudolf Hess, the 89-year-old Nazi war criminal, is reported to prefer the cooking provided by the American captors.

And, to demonstrate their right to move freely, the four nations send daily

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